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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000027

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DEPT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2020/01/19
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: OMAN CIVIL SOCIETY AWARDS HERALD SHIFTING WINDS

REF: MUSCAT 01; 09 MUSCAT 1089

CLASSIFIED BY: Richard J. Schimierer, Ambassador, Department of State; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Oman's first civil-society awards ceremony, a high-profile event organized by the Sultanate's first private think tank, is the latest sign that the climate for social and political activism in Oman is changing. The level of official and private support that the event received is as striking as the hands-off attitude adopted by the official body charged with managing civil society affairs - which itself may be a reflection of significant social change. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) On Tuesday, January 12, local think tank Tawasul culminated a month-long online, national promotional campaign and vote by hosting the Oman Civil Society Leaders 2009 Awards. The event, sponsored by the National Bank of Oman, was held at Muscat's Diplomatic Club under the patronage of HH Sayyid Faisal bin Turki Al Said, a dynamic young member of the royal family. The over 200 guests represented a wide cross-section of local non-governmental institutions and associations, prominent business, academic, women's and youth leaders, international organizations active in the Sultanate, and members of the diplomatic corps. Awards were announced in categories including Best Social Investment Program (public and private sectors), Best Civil Society Organization (with subcategories for non-charitable (i.e., issue advocacy) NGOs, Women's Associations, and private initiatives), and male and female Civil Society Leaders of the Year. Special awards recognized the work of two leading family foundations, as well as that of a recently deceased women's-issues activist. Resulting media attention was extensive, positive, and included both the private and state media.

13. (SBU) In advance of the event, Tawasul collected 16,640 votes via an online poll promoted through popular discussion forum Al Sabla (www.omania2.net). The winners reflected a nationwide focus, with nominated and winning organizations and individuals located across the Sultanate from the far northern exclave of Musandam to Salalah in Oman's southern Dhofar region. Winners included the nationally active Al Noor Association for the Blind's Dhofar branch (best non-charitable NGO); an Eid fundraising project organized by state telecom provider Omantel and Bank Muscat with support from the Ministry of Social Development (best public-sector social-investment initiative); and a Dhofar-based teacher who promoted illiteracy eradication along with the organizer of an innovative parent-teacher council in the Dhahirah region (best female and male civil society leaders, respectively).

14. (C) COMMENT: This kind of privately organized, widely publicized event might seem routine elsewhere; in Oman, it represents a genuine shift in official and privately held attitudes toward the role of civil society activists and organizations. Organizers and attendees alike were impressed with if not surprised

by the result of some votes (which saw big-name nominees outshone by grassroots efforts in several categories, as in the winning Women's Association, Shinas, rather than the elite Muscat chapter), with the attendance of young royals and noted figures, and, subsequently, by the extent and tone of press coverage. Event organizer Tawasul and its leadership have experienced challenges in establishing the organization and determining the permissible space for public activities (REF A). When discussing the event the morning after, Tawasul executive director (and former Embassy Muscat FSN) Khalid al Haribi (strictly protect) said that in the wake of a program of this scope and demonstrated success, pressuring Tawasul and its growing group of local activists becomes a significantly more complicated challenge for the Omani government. It may be a challenge that, based on the official support the program received, the government is decreasingly interested in pursuing. Asked if he felt that aspects such as the participation of Sayyid Faisal (and the attendance of two more young royals), the sponsorship by the National Bank, and the very high visibility of this program (which included front-page reporting in the state dailies) provided additional breathing room for Tawasul and his own personal activism, al Haribi enthusiastically agreed.

15. (C) COMMENT, CONTINUED: Furthermore, the hands-off attitude adopted by the Ministry of Social Development (responsible for oversight of associations and civil society activities in the Sultanate) may be a sign that its leadership has misjudged the

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momentum gathering in Oman's private sector. Another Tawasul organizer commented to Emboff that the Minister's office, in response to outreach from Tawasul soliciting her attendance at the Awards, had indicated blandly that she would be "otherwise engaged" even before a date had been proffered. Mid-level contacts at the Ministry did attend (some in private capacities related to their own work and interests), but the consensus among organizers seems to be that the Ministry is in danger of being rendered irrelevant as Omanis interested in social and political reform look outside traditional channels and at activities like those organized by Tawasul (REF B). "She's left the barn door open," said a Tawasul associate of the Minister, adding that "the great question now" is whether and how the Ministry might try to regain the upper hand. Post was glad to see a heavy presence by exchange program alumni and longtime mission contacts among those recognized by and attending the awards ceremony, and we will continue to monitor and report on changes (formerly glacial; still incremental) in Oman's civil society landscape. END COMMENT.
Schmierer